

Food movements: how should they go about change?

Power is multidimensional. So the action of food movements must be too.

The development of local food policies is an opportunity for food movements.

Policy outcomes are not the only thing that matters: process matters too.

Over the last two decades, food movements have gained prominence in the Global North, advocating for a more sustainable and a fairer food system. Are they making a difference? And if so, how? In a book called *Civil Society and Social Movements in Food System Governance*, scholars give us a peek into social movements' strategies for food system change. The book will help food movements better position their action to make an impact. It will also be useful for local authorities willing to work with them.

There is not one single way to have an impact...

First, what does it mean to "have an impact"? Researchers remind us that there are 3 types of power that can be used:

- **Instrumental power, which entails wielding influence on other actors using a variety of resources** (technical, financial, and organisational – such as, for instance, the ability to work with other actors ([see our previous article on this...](#))). This is the most obvious form of power.
- **Discursive power: an actor has discursive power when its way of seeing a problem is the one all other actors share.** For instance, food can be seen as market commodity, or as commons, and this does not entail the same policies. Civil society organisations spend a lot of time trying to reframe problems.
- **Structural power, which is the power to set the rules under which decisions are taken.** When governance structures are already set (which is generally the case at the global or national level), food activists usually do not have much ability to influence this.

Therefore, **power is multidimensional. So action must be too.**

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[Peter Andrée, Jill K. Clark, Charles Z. Levkoe, Kristen Lowitt \(Ed\) \(2019\). *Civil Society and Social Movements in Food System Governance*, 1st Edition, Routledge](#)

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... and contexts can vary greatly, too

The context food organisations operate in will also enable or constraint action.

Some governance settings can be very open, and easy to access, thus making it easy to gain a seat at the table, or even to set the table. For instance, **the development of local food policies is an opportunity for food movements** as local governments are only starting to develop expertise in this field, and are happy to tap into food actors' experience. Moreover, big corporate actors are generally little involved in local governance processes.

On the contrary, some decision-making processes are held behind closed doors, or even hidden, and more difficult to access. Some are public, but they are so institutionalised that it is uneasy to change the rules.

This analysis points to key questions local authorities can ask themselves to gauge whether their governance settings enable or restrain civil society participation. These are:

- Is the decision making process open?
- Does it acknowledge power and resources asymmetries and try to rebalance them?
- What is its capacity to accept and integrate dissent?
- To which extent does it build trust between actors? Indeed, as the researchers put it: *"the first step in a collaborative governance planning process is not planning, but focusing on building relationships, trust, and shared values."*

Taking a seat at the table, setting the table or dining outside?

Even if they broadly seek a more sustainable and fairer food system, food organisations are very diverse. They do not have a single agenda. Even in a very similar context, with similar opportunities, movements can develop different approaches to change and different levels of engagement in governance processes.

The researchers highlight three main strategies along a *"governance engagement continuum"*:

- **Developing alternatives outside of the dominant food system.** This is the way Alternative Food Networks operate, for instance with farmers' markets, Community Supported Agriculture or fair trade labels. These groups mainly operate in an autonomous way, with the objective to build change one concrete project at a time.
- **Seeking incremental change within the system.** This is possible when governance settings allow it, and it comes with questions regarding possible trade-offs and compromises. A case study from New Zealand shows that interaction between local food movements and the Council came with benefits (getting the food issue on the political agenda), but also with limits (narrowing the scope of the problem from a broad systemic one to an economic development challenge).
- **Directly challenging the system and staying outside.** These organisations generally advocate for a different framing of the problem as they relate food issues with profound structural inequalities in the food system, or society itself. They find it difficult



to fit their objectives (food sovereignty, right to food...) into existing policy processes.

Process matters

Which strategy works best? Analysis shows that we probably need a bit of everything. As Jill Clark, who co-edited the book, highlights, *“power is not a simple insiders / outsiders game”*.

- First, because change will happen if food organisations are able to multiply entry points into the system.
- Second, because food movements should be aware that policy outcomes are not the only thing that matters: **process matters too**. So actors that invest into creating trust and building their capacity to engage in policy processes are making a valuable contribution to change. Researchers call this the “power to convene”, i.e. to change the way food problems are framed through deliberation.

What does this mean for food organisations? According to Jill Clark, they should better analyse where they stand in the wider sustainable food movement. This will help them understand how they can cooperate with organisations that have chosen a different strategy. And better work together as a food movement.

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